Speaking Up: Understanding Language and Gender

Allyson Jule (2018)

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Reviewed by Ke Zhang

Allyson Jule, professor of education at Trinity Western University, is a leading scholar on gender studies through her numerous publications; for example, *Gender, Participation and Silence in the Language Classroom* (2004). The distinguishing feature of her new monograph, *Speaking Up*, is the width of its topical coverage; that is, it explores how language interacts with gender in broader social settings – in the media, at school, at work, in religions and in personal relationships. Such a variety makes this book valuable to new researchers and general readers alike in the fields of sociolinguistics, gender studies and discourse analysis.

Speaking Up consists of eight chapters. Except for the concluding chapter (Chapter 8), the rest are organised into two parts, each with a summing-up section. In my view, this is one strength of Jule's book, in that it reminds readers of key information and helps to reflect on important arguments in an easy manner. Specifically, Part I, 'Understanding Gender and Language Use', contains two theoretical chapters (Chapters 1 and 2). Part II, including five chapters (Chapters 3 to 7), is entitled 'Understanding Gender and Language Use in the World'. These five chapters serve as the main body of this book, availing readers the opportunity to explore relationships between gender and language in the diverse contexts mentioned earlier.

Chapter 1, 'The Basics', looks at several notions that are integral to the field of gender/sexuality studies; for instance, feminism, sex, gender, LGBTQ+, and neoliberalism. For want of space, I focus here only on two points. Of

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particular interest to me is Jule's rethinking of the sex/gender distinction. As opposed to the common view that sex is biologically determined and born, while gender is socially constructed and located, Jule argues in favour of Judith Butler's view: gender is something we do or perform rather than we are. And second, while localised in Western context, Jule's mention of LGBT (a less researched topic in China) is highly significant for Chinese linguists; I suggest Jule's study be taken as a valuable stimulus to broaden research on such a relevant field.

Chapter 2 is entitled 'Language as Gendered', in which Jule first details the notion of *sexism*, by recounting its history and explaining the so-called 'sexist language'. Then she questions previous assumptions related to gendered language as power. For instance, the early study by Robin Lakoff on women's language is examined here: feminine speech style is characterised by several features like hedges, tag questions, more intensifiers, direct quotations, politeness, and modal constructions. However, by referring to the theory of deficit or dominance and the theory of difference, Jule reminds the reader to consider the social context and the specific culture when examining sex-preferential tendencies. In her later discussion of gender as a social construction, Jule convincingly argues that Critical Discourse Analysis is 'particularly helpful in gender and language studies because of its main concern with, and focus on, power' (p. 30).

On reading the title of Chapter 3, which includes key words like 'media' and 'technology', my first reaction was whether it would deal with genderedness in social-networking tools like Facebook and Instagram. In fact, readers are invited to focus on broader issues scattered in eight sections in this chapter. More specifically, sections one and four engage with gender representations in film and television alike. Readers are drawn into the fact that female voices account for a lower percentage of not only speaking characters in modern media, but film directors as well. Sections two and three scrutinise language use in advertisements, in which Jule shows that women are more susceptible to advertisements. And the last four sections answer the question of how computer games intersect with gender. One point of criticism that should be noted in Chapter 3 is that as most of the references are limited to 2013 and before, the coverage of topics in this chapter is not comprehensive.

Gender issues in relation to the educational system are discussed in Chapter 4, which yields illuminating insights into education curriculum for policy makers and teacher educators. More specifically, three topics are covered here, the first of which concerns gender inequality in classrooms; for instance, boys are given more attention and time than girls for participation, rendering sex discrimination and gender struggle. Phenomena

like this presuppose the male-dominated patriarchy in society. Building on the first topic, the second looks into the participation strategy (i.e. *silence*) adopted by female students. This highlights the fact that girls receive less recognition and encouragement from their teachers, and they are not as confident as boys who use more *linguistic space* in teacher–student interactions. The last topic encourages readers to reconsider whether higher performances of girls at school are indicative of high success later in their life or not. We actually need more evidence to substantiate such a consideration.

Chapter 5 engages readers with previous studies on language and gender in workplaces. Particularly interesting is Jule's summary of wo/men's style of leadership (with references to Henry Mintzberg's and Sally Helgesen's work). Taken together, this chapter serves as a strong reminder that few women can achieve top positions of leadership compared with men. Hillary Clinton's loss of the 2016 US presidential election is an example of what makes Jule's exploration so convincing. Such phenomena are termed as the glass ceiling, which not only renders unfairness and violates basic human rights, but also diminishes various voices of women.

Chapter 6 touches upon gendered language situated within religious communities, notably Christianity and Islam. With regard to the first, Jule walks readers through two prevailing views – the egalitarian and complementarian view – related to female roles within Christianity. More importantly here, she notes that feminist scholars have turned to understand God as both male and female. As for the second, Jule drives home the point that Muslim women's wearing the hijab not only expresses 'their Muslim or national/cultural identity', but also challenges 'Western feminist discourses' that consider Islam as 'a male-dominated religion' (pp. 86–7). She additionally elaborates on such notions as *guardianship* and *sexuality* in Muslim societies. Jule's insightful exploration of this topic is an ideal companion to Yusuf M. Sidani's (2018) book on the status of Arab women. Unfortunately, this chapter is somewhat weakened due to her shorter examination of Judaism.

In Chapter 7 Jule illustrates how gendered talks function within interpersonal groupings. Through her observation, the reader first has a view of different speech styles utilised by wo/men at home. For instance, women prefer using individualised topics and symmetrical exchanges to preserve intimacy, while men prefer generalised ones and are less engaged in family conversations. Subsequently, Jule takes readers' attention to politeness and compliment related to fe/male friendships through an analysis of the work of Jennifer Coates, Janet Holmes and Rosalind Wiseman. Here, not only does she explicate that female friendships are particularly complex, but

also forcefully demonstrates that ‘women tend to build rapport with others through conversations, and men tend to function as individuals more disengaged from personal relationships’ (p. 97).

Jule’s conclusions presented in Chapter 8 unsurprisingly show that ‘some persistent language patterns that align with gender’ (p. 98) ‘in politics, the law, in sports, in psychological development, in aging, or in various cultures around the world of course’ (pp. 100–101) await further investigation. Unfortunately, this chapter suffers from one primary weakness: Jule provides alternative words like ‘tapestry’ and ‘symphony’ for gender ‘difference’ without delving deeply into the ways in which such terms would be employed and shifted in reality.

After reading *Speaking Up*, I find that there is much to be praised about it. The first thing to say is its helpful inclusion of a seven-page glossary of terms and concepts. For a reader without much previous knowledge in the study of gender and language, the terms detailed within the glossary are reader-friendly and eye-opening. Moreover, Jule familiarises readers with current changes to the English language in use. The second thing to say is that while Jule has made it clear that her purpose is to examine how genderedness is represented in different contexts, she adds value to this book by dedicating an amount of space to considering other illuminating issues like the #MeToo movement, campus violence (e.g. sexual assault and rape), online misogyny, gendered role, together with the power of language. Such topics help to reflect on our own experiences in daily life. Overall, Jule’s book succeeds in providing us with a holistic picture of gender studies from a macro perspective. I recommend it.

References

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- Sidani, Y. M. (2018) *Muslim Women at Work: Religious Discourses in Arab Society*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-63221-6>